

First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA
“Summoning Memories”
Sunday, November 1, 2015, 10:30am

Reading "What Does It Mean To Be A People of Ancestry?" Scott Taylor,
 UUA Director of Congregational Life, Soul Matters Sharing Circle

Some people are your relatives but others are your ancestors, and you choose the ones you want to have as ancestors. You create yourself out of those values.

— **Ralph Ellison, American writer**

Our faith agrees with Ellison: there is a difference between relatives and ancestors.

Relatives give us our brown eyes and bowed legs; ancestors bless and burden us with a legacy. Relatives are those we tell stories about; ancestors call us to carry the story forward. Our relatives allowed us to be here; our ancestors tell us *why* we are here and why being here right now matters. The difference is huge. It is — as Ellison also points out — all about choosing to see yourself differently and live by a different set of values.

Take success. There's an old line that challenges the hubris of some people with privilege: "He was born on third base but believes that he hit a triple." People who choose to see their lives through the lens of ancestry constantly remind themselves how they really got there. Instead of talking with puffed up chests about how they hit a triple, you will hear them speak of "the shoulders on which I stand." Hubris or humility? Ancestors never let us forget the latter.

You will also hear ancestor-conscious people speak of blessings differently. People of ancestry look at their blessings and choose to see not only a gift, but also a responsibility. It's one thing to gratefully celebrate the blessings passed on to us; it's quite another to be so grateful for those blessings that we can't help but ensure they get passed on to others. Simply put, ancestors pass on obligations. To be a people of ancestry means recognizing

that something of value has been entrusted to you and that there is a long line of people behind you counting on you to pass it on. Even *expecting* this of you.

And whether that expectation feels to you like a blessing or a burden, it most surely also reminds you that you are part of something larger. Ancestors don't simply tell you that you are obligated; they tell you that you are obligated *to something larger*. And not just that you are obligated to it, but that it is dependent *on you*. Whether the story continues to be told is up to you! Whether the family tradition continues to be done is up to you! Whether the native language continues to be taught to the children is up to you! Whether the family cycles of health are strengthened or the family cycles of dysfunction are stopped is up to you! Ancestors plop these incomplete and intimidating endeavors in our laps and say, "We've done our part and taken it as far as we can. The next step of the journey is in your hands."

Which of course also means that our hands are connected. They handed the precious gift to us. We are asked to hand it on to those who follow. And they will hopefully continue the sacred chain.

And in the end, maybe it all boils down to that: seeing ourselves as part of a sacred chain. We are not small. Our lives are not insignificant or independent. Our choices are not without consequence to others. We are part of a story, not just a set of random happenings. Our choices tell the next chapter. Our choices connect the next link. Our choices pass on that which is precious and remind us we are preciousy connected. This is what choosing to be a people of ancestry means. This is how it asks us to see our lives. So, this month, let us all be grateful for those brown eyes, but choose to be part of the precious chain.

The words of the prophet Hosea: [NRSV 4:1-2, 12-13]

[God Accuses Israel]

4:1 Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;

for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty,

and no knowledge of God in the land.

² Swearing, lying, and murder,

and stealing and adultery break out;

bloodshed follows bloodshed....

[Wait a minute – am I in the wrong pulpit today? Bear with me....]

¹² My people consult a piece of wood,

and their divining rod gives them oracles.

For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,

and they have played the whore, forsaking their God.

¹³ They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains,

and make offerings upon the hills,

under oak, poplar, and terebinth,

because their shade is good.

We're hearing in this passage the rage of the God of a new religion against the gods and practices of an old religion, a pagan religion, a religion of the earth. The prophet Hosea's story of being called by God to issue warnings of destruction is among the most

remarkable known. Hosea— who lived in the northern kingdom of Israel around 750 BCE — reports [Hosea 3:1] that

... the LORD said to me, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.”

“Cakes of raisins” – what’s *that* about? It’s pretty clear that what *that’s* about is the same thing that the prophet Jeremiah denounced in his time, saying [Jeremiah 7:18:]

Children are gathering firewood, fathers are building fires with it, and women are mixing dough to bake cakes to offer to the goddess they call the Queen of Heaven.

They are also pouring out drink offerings to other gods. They seem to do all this just to trouble me.

Cakes for the Queen of Heaven.... In the mid-1970’s, some of the women in our Unitarian Universalist movement began exploring the ways in which our religious language, practices and observances made women feel less included. This was a time when women were first coming into our ministry in significant numbers, and – quoting now from a web site for our Adult Religious Education curriculum “Cakes for the Queen of Heaven:”

In 1977 the UUA General Assembly unanimously passed the Women & Religion Resolution, calling on all individual UUs and UU organizations to examine and put aside sexist assumptions, attitudes, and language; to explore and eliminate religious roots of sexism in myths, traditions and beliefs.

The impact of this resolution has been profound; ranging from the establishment of women’s spiritual retreats, to the rapid increase in the number of

female UU ministers. It has prompted incorporation of more ritual, such as chalice lighting and “Joys and Sorrows” into our services, as well as the review and revision of our Principles and Purposes. Curricula celebrating the female as divine have been developed, including Cakes for the Queen of Heaven....

“Cakes for the Queen of Heaven” is a woman honoring adult RE curriculum by Rev. Shirley Ranck. It examines pre-Judeo Christian cultures that may have worshiped the female as divine.... The primary question raised is: How would your life have been different if, when growing up, the divine had been imaged as female? Participants are encouraged to share their own experiences and beliefs, creating trust and strong bonds of friendship.¹

I know that a number of women in this congregation have participated in “Cakes,” and our service today is in part a result of what we have all learned about religious traditions that preceded the religions of Israel and of Christianity. Part of what was rediscovered was that pre-Christian religions – at least in some of their forms – included far more respect for the feminine – and the earth – than Christianity does. Our Thought for Contemplation, our Sixth Source, was included in part as a result of the Women & Religion resolution; it acknowledges that

THE LIVING TRADITION WE SHARE DRAWS FROM MANY SOURCES
[including] ... – Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Our own Puritan ancestors struggled against these earth-centered traditions in Salem, where they came to believe that demonic forces – to wit, pagan religious practices – were making inroads in their community fostered by witches. The Salem Witch Trials remain a blot on our nations' conscience and – wouldn't you know it – the ones who promoted it were our own ancestors – Puritans in the First Parish of Salem, among others. So it's no surprise that Hosea's denunciations of ancient women's love of raisin cakes might have come down from this – formerly Puritan – pulpit as well.

And what does that all have to do with Samhain? Well, Samhain is an ancient Celtic festival that falls on November 1 and celebrates this hinge of the year as the harvest is behind and the cold, hard winter is ahead. It's thought that the festival may have originated at a time when the Celts were primarily a herding people, and that Beltane – May 1 – was when the herds were taken up to the hills for the summer pasture – and Samhain – November 1st – was when the herds were brought back down for the winter. These two hinges of the year – each roughly halfway between an equinox and a solstice – correspond to many other celebrations of the return of the spring (for example Passover and Easter) and the commencement of winter (Sukkot, All Saints Day).

So here we are, talking about an ancient pagan festival on one of the sacred days of the Christian Calendar, All Saints Day. How did that happen? Well, to tell the truth, Samhain got there first. All Saints Day originally fell on May 13th but was changed to Nov. 1 in the mid-700's, presumably to pre-empt the previously existent pagan feasts of the autumn like Samhain as Christianity began to displace the more ancient Celtic religious traditions.

What are we to make of the persistence of these festivals such that Christian popes were forced to place new festivals at just the time of the old ones (think Christmas vs. the Roman Saturnalia – solstice celebration)? There's the attempt to displace old traditions, of course, but there's also a recognition that there's something underneath all of this – that something calls us at this time of year. It's a liminal time, a time of transition, and – to credit the pagan traditions of Samhain, a time when the veil between the living and the dead is almost transparent, when spirits can return to us, whether for good or for ill. All of this is caricatured in Halloween ghosts and skeletons, of course, and is celebrated joyfully in Mexico's Day of the Dead celebrations.

This celebration of Samhain brings us back to Earth Time, reminds us that, like our ancestors, we are subject to the seasons. It is a necessary wake-up call for us to consider our relationship to our Mother Earth and our shared dependency on this, the only world we have, our common home. So perhaps it's not surprising that Pope Francis's call for us to take better care of our earth in his recent encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home*, led some to detect a whiff of paganism. *Mother Jones* magazine reported on a recent conference by the Heartland Institute of Chicago, a leading climate change denialist organization – funded by a number of leading climate skeptics, including the Charles G Koch Charitable Foundation². Gene Koprowski, director of marketing, said

"When the Vatican leapt into the controversy on climate science, we were initially under the impression that His Holiness was a victim of bad advice from bad advisers," Koprowski said Thursday. "There were people from the UN who were

population control advocates. There were people from other left-wing groups who were advising the pontiff."

But Koprowski said that after the pope released his landmark encyclical calling for action on climate change, he began to suspect that "something more may be afoot." Koprowski then invoked pagan rituals and "nature worship" that he said were "seeping into the Church" during the Middle Ages, adding: "I'm wondering, as a scholar, if pagan forms are returning to the Church this day."

Koprowski concluded: "I would say, contrary to some of the criticism, that this is not communism that has entered the church. It's, rather, paganism."³

If this be paganism, let's make the most of it! We need to be reminded to turn toward the earth and toward our ancestors, and this time of year – this day – is an opportunity to do so. This day – at its heart, is about our ancestors, the debts we owe them, and our continuity with them.

One of the customs associated with this and other pagan holidays is leaving gifts of food for the souls of the departed. What's that about, you might ask? Why offer cakes to the Queen of Heaven – what's she gonna do, *eat* them? I think that what we're witnessing here is a practice whose purpose is to remind us that we are not self-made; that what we have is not just our own, but is the fruit of the labors of generations of our ancestors, of their work, their love and – quite literally – their genes. So setting aside food or other offerings is a symbolic way of acknowledging that we owe a debt to those who came before us.

Our *religious* ancestors, the Unitarians and Universalists who distinguished themselves from believers in the more traditional Puritan doctrines over two centuries ago, were living at a time of increasing religious diversity and came to recognize that there is not only one religious path. Our Universalist ancestors took as the key to their belief that God is Love and that separating the world into saints and sinners, saved and damned, *could not* be the will of an all-loving God. And, to extend their universalizing impulses to our world, we recognize that all people seek that which is sacred, that which gives meaning to their lives, with many different symbols and words and rituals. What we care about is what is at the heart of each of these, how they speak to our spirits, how they help to guide us aright in our living.

We owe a great debt to the Women & Religion resolution for opening our eyes to the rich diversity of festivals underlying *both* men's and women's religions in history, and in particular for bringing back an understanding of the role of the Goddess in religious understanding.

This day, this festival of Samhain, this day that Church leaders recognized centuries ago as having a special significance, this day is about our place in the generations. It opens us – opens a thin veil, if you will – to an awareness of a more real presence of those who brought us to life over many generations. It gives us an opportunity to place ourselves on a line of human beings stretching back to the dawn of time, and of primeval ancestors before that, and of the earth before that. We stand in the middle, between the past and the future, given life from before and passing on life to those who come after. AND we know that both good and ill have come down to us. Not everything our parents

did was good or right, nor our grandparents or the generations before. Some of us have suffered horrible abuse, have been battered, have been deprived. But we have our lives given to us to live in this moment by those who came before. And so we need to consider – what is it that we want to leave behind? How do we mean to be different by *not* repeating the ills that were visited on us? Who do we choose to claim as our ancestors, as Scott Taylor put it in our reading? And how do we reckon what we owe, what has been given us, what we owe our gratitude for?

Here we are at this liminal time, standing in the line of generations past and future, and we gather to consider what it is we should cherish, and what instead we should yield up to the bonfire. What will I leave after me? And what of ill that has come down to me will I refuse to repeat? How ought we to live in the light of the past and in the hope of the future? Where do I fit in among these generations? What are my unique gifts, and burdens, and opportunities? How then should I live in the face of my own death, which is as inevitable as the onset of winter year after year after year.

Mary Oliver reflects on that coming day in her own life:

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

